

1984

## Photo-realist portraiture

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( PHOTO-REALIST PORTRAITURE )

by

ELAINE R. FLESKES

A Thesis Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

PAINTING

Portland State University, 1984

## INTRODUCTION

The paintings and drawings in my thesis exhibition developed from my interest in genre and portrait painting. I am concerned with observing and recording individuals in predominantly casual poses that relate to their daily routine. In forming an accurate analysis of character I limited my choice of subject to those most familiar to me, my family and friends. My background as the daughter of a minister turned educational psychologist and my experience as a wife and mother certainly contributed to the way I approach portraiture. My preference for a highly rendered, realistic style was undoubtedly influenced by my professional training as a graphic artist and illustrator.

The study of art history provided influences and inspirations. The painters most important to my work range from Jan Vermeer, Diego Velasquez, Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt, and Edgar Hopper to contemporary realists such as Chuck Close and Phillip Pearlstein. Velasquez's masterpiece, Las Meninas (1656), Jan Vermeer's Young Woman with a Water Jug (c. 1665), and Edgar Degas' The Bellelli Family (1860-2) are particular favorites of mine. Although based firmly on an abstract foundation, these paintings give the illusion of a single, frozen moment of reality. I find the effect similar to the unguarded, captured moments often found in photographic snap shots, and my awareness of this quality contributed to my decision to explore the use of photographs as an integral part of my work.

The images I use are those that contain psychological

overtones and subliminal messages to convey the personality of the subject. My intent is opposed to that of the Photo-Realist Chuck Close who strives not to comment on the character of his subjects. I am more favorably disposed to Degas' highly naturalistic portrait of the Bellelli Family, in which the viewer is allowed access to the interpersonal relationships of the four family members. Degas used a number of elements to communicate his observations. In each character there is a well chosen facial expression, reinforced by body posture and gesture. The placement of the figures within the composition, the choice of hairstyle and manner of clothing, the subtle use of furnishings, and the overall tonality and abstract shapes present in the painting all work together to communicate to the observer something of the family's personal situation. In my work I wish to communicate my observations about the individual or situation portrayed. I do so by carefully selecting images that are psychologically potent and by manipulating the composition to reinforce my perceptions.

## THE WORK PROCESS

The use of photographic images as source material allows me to make careful and prolonged observations of the individual or situation presented. It offers an opportunity to perceive on a conscious level subliminal messages important to the work that might otherwise be lost. The camera selects a single moment of time to record with an objectivity that cannot be equaled by traditional sketching methods. This makes it a most interesting and useful tool. In a photograph the model is always available for additional study and I need not worry that the pose, the physical appearance of the subject or the light quality will alter before the work is completed. I work from both color and black and white photographs, and find no real difference between them as the ultimate color selection is always discretionary. I choose colors with an eye for abstract compositional balance and its effect on the mood or psychological feeling I wish to express.

I begin a portrait by doing a number of preliminary studies, both on film and from life when the subject is available. Life studies are particularly beneficial when I am working with an individual for the first time; I can familiarize myself with the face from a 3-dimensional view point that greatly assists my ability to translate that image onto a 2-dimensional plane. All the studies are kept close at hand and used for reference during the process of the work.

I generally select two or three snap shots as possibilities for the composition and then begin to crop the pictures

in various ways, using small mats, or view finders. I am aware of the variations in mood or feeling that take place as I experiment with different ways of cropping the image.

I always crop the original composition of the photograph to some degree. I wish to control my finished compositions and cropping is a vital part of that process. I believe that every part of the composition must contribute to the effect of the whole, that no one part is incidental or unrelated. The formal elements of the composition are considered; the abstract shapes that aid the structure of the work, the balance and rhythms formed through movement of line, color, value and light. During the cropping process I begin to select those elements I feel will best support my concept.

Scale is an important factor. The size of the piece, and also the scale of the image within the overall work, must be given attention. A large painting, or one in which the image is highly cropped and therefore large in scale within its framework, will command the viewer's attention and actually overpower his space. A smaller work or image will be more intimate in nature and allow the viewer to relate to the work in a more relaxed way. The effect of scale to the mood of the portrait is carefully considered.

I execute a number of small tracings of the photo while I am cropping. With the aid of these tracings I select the final composition. I make any alterations to the design that seem necessary for the work to come closer to my initial idea or to an idea discovered during the manipulation of the composition. My general tendency is to omit certain passages or

to simplify the forms in order to strengthen the abstract structure of the work. If needed, I will add elements not found in the original photograph. Some of the pieces are more literal in translation than others; this is a matter of intuitive choice.

I transfer the image from the small tracing to the work surface (whether it be canvas or paper) by using a grid system. I sketch in the basic shapes and lines of movement in a free-hand manner. Although I considered using a projector to assure a more accurate reproduction of the sketch, I rejected the idea since I gain a great deal of satisfaction from drawing and feel that the compositions gain a degree of life that might be lost in mechanical procedures. If the composition is simple, I keep the drawing quick and loose; if the composition is complex, I spend more time tightening up the sketch and adding more detail. Once I begin the actual painting or drawing, other changes in composition and color selection occur. The work is considered open to changes until I am confident I have found an appropriate combination of elements.

The paintings in my thesis exhibit are done in oil on a white gesso ground. I use soft brushes and rags to apply the paint in thin washes and glazes. I prefer to build up areas of color slowly as this facilitates making changes. I use turpentine soaked rags to remove areas of color; I am a subtractive as well as an additive painter.

The finished, or more complete drawings in the exhibition are done in pastel and often colored pencil on charcoal paper. I prefer using colored paper even if I work the drawing



heavily over the entire surface and the original color of the paper is lost. My emotional response to the paper's color can often influence my approach to the subject. It certainly affects the colors selected for the final composition and is therefore chosen with care.

## DISCUSSION OF INDIVIDUAL WORKS

The small pastel entitled Bill #5 (plate 1) is one of a series of works I completed of my friend Bill. This was one of my early attempts at radically cropping an image. The cropping intensified both my emotional response to the subject and to the interesting abstract shapes. I chose to work from a snap shot I took of Bill sleeping; the turmoil and anguish present in his expression during rest was significant and reflected his state of mind. I gave particular attention to the rhythms created by the ridges of the face, the folds in the shirt and the pattern of the pillow. I omitted a lot of the detail in order to establish an agreeable flow or movement from form to form.



The surface of the charcoal paper was worked with equal attention to all areas and this led to a visual cohesiveness.

Plate 1

Bill #5  
11" x 9"



In the pencil drawing Marcia and Jason (plate 2), I sought to describe the relationship between my two children. I took a lengthy series of photographs and selected this one as I enjoyed the casual posing of the figures and the guarded way in which they acknowledge each other's presence. Marcia is the more assured, aggressive personality and I felt it appropriate that she be placed in the forward position.

In order to achieve a separation I left much of the flat black paper unworked, partially because of the interesting abstract shapes provided, but also as an experiment with the tension created between the realistically rendered forms and the flat shapes. I found that the black areas produced a feeling of spatial ambiguity that was interesting, but not completely satisfactory for me.

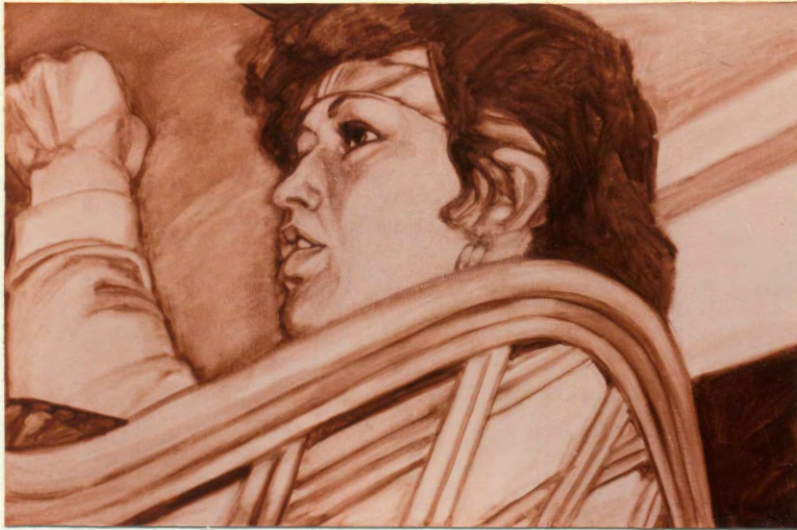


Plate 2

Marcia and Jason  
10" x 14"



Plate 3

Marcia at 16  
24" x 36"

Marcia at 16 (plate 3) is representative of a series of paintings I produced using only brown oil applied in turpentine washes. This permitted me to study value and shape at some length. Marcia's gesture and expression are indicative of her strength of personality. The form of the chair moving through the composition serves as a spatial barrier between the viewer and the subject. I closely cropped the image in order to heighten the abstract quality of the shapes and found this provided a simplified repetition of line visually pleasing to me. The loose quality of the turpentine washes gives this painting a spontaneity most often associated with watercolor.



The large oil, Bruce (plate 4), began as one of the series of brown-tone paintings. This work is the result of two photographs combined to make a statement of my feelings and thoughts about Bruce. The large size of the image and the strong shapes formed by the framework of the room gives this painting a commanding presence that I find spiritual and symbolic in nature. The scale discrepancy between the two portrait images adds a strongly surreal quality that is unusual in my work. Color was added to this work almost a full year after its inception. There are strong contrasts between the areas of light and dark and between the muted yellow greens and deep reds that add much to the force of the composition.



Plate 4

66"  $\frac{\text{Bruce}}{\text{x } 54''}$



The drawing David (plate 5) was done in pastel and colored pencil. I wanted to experiment with a highly cropped image, cropped in a manner and to a degree that the abstract design and pattern become a dominant element in the composition without losing the identity and character of the subject. I made a series of sketches from random fragments of the snapshots selected and I found that two segments were needed to form a more complete statement of character. The hands have a sensitive, restless quality and the placement of the single eye in the upper corner creates ambivalence in the viewer. I placed the two pieces horizontally rather than vertically as this increased the impression of fragmentation. I was concerned with the way in which the segments fit together and tried several different combinations until I achieved a correct balance. I limited my colors to the same range on each half to prevent the image from losing all continuity.



Plate 5

David  
12" x 24"



Plate 6

Kathleen  
48" x 60"

In Kathleen (plate 6) I returned to a larger canvas. I found this snap shot particularly revealing of one part of Kathleen's personality. There is a teasing quality to the pose and an element of narcissism and vanity present in the situation. The double image is not contrived as it is in the large portrait of Bruce, but the mirror image does provide interest in the composition. The surface of the work is animated by the dark dress and the light wall. The pattern of the foliage behind the figure and the flowered border on the dress creates a sense of activity. The shape of the forward image is almost in silhouette and contrasts strongly with the impressionistic handling of the background areas. This makes an interesting dichotomy that works well with this piece.



In the small canvas entitled Terry, Richard, Kathy and Jim (plate 7) I worked from a family photograph taken without deliberate posing. The arbitrary positioning of the family members is crucial to the psychological content of the work. The hand gestures are significant, particularly that of the husband who is only represented by his shirt, on the right, and by his hand inserted between his wife and the oldest child. The composition is complex. The activity of the strong diagonal elements and the choppy rhythm of the shapes become visually exciting. I worked with a strong primary color scheme that further activated the surface of the work. In order to subdue the activity somewhat I eliminated most of the impressionistic brush strokes and limited myself to a smoother application of paint.



Plate 7

Terry, Richard, Kathy and Jim  
24" x 36"



Adgie, Rachel and Jenny (plate 8) is another family group, composed of a woman and her two grandchildren. It is the most sentimental and narrative of this exhibition, but this did not deter me as I felt strongly drawn to this image. Again the positioning of the hands is important to the content of the work. The older child on the right is listening with an enraptured expression and her hands are entwined in a gesture that could be interpreted as anticipation, delight or perhaps spirituality. The younger child is studiously trying to imitate the response of the older. I see a process of growth taking place within this family that is both charming and poignant. In cropping the image I found that the shape of the cloth on the chair was suggestive of angel wings. I strengthened this illusion by my choice of color, pattern and feathery brushwork.



Plate 8

Adgie, Rachel and Jenny  
40" x 50"



Courtney and John at the Beach (plate 9) is an image that could be viewed as sentimental but I believe it has strong psychological implications. I see the empty bucket as symbolic of the womb and the beginning of life. The photograph has captured the child in a moment of revelation; she has just rediscovered her toes which had been buried in the sand. The man's arm coming into the picture is deliberately ambiguous. The gesture is one of protection, but the size of the arm and the way in which it is cropped makes it vaguely ominous and threatening. I strengthened the colors of the shirt and the play of shadow on the arm to enhance this feeling. The purposefully awkward composition augments the mood



and leaves the viewer somewhat unsettled. I used a much freer painting technique in this work; the paint was applied in washes and thin glazes to create a feeling of strong sunlight appropriate to the image.

Plate 9      Courtney and John at  
    the Beach  
    48" x 38"

## CONCLUSION

The body of work I produced during my thesis exploration represents my attempt to give visual form to my experiences, feelings and ideas. I am attracted to themes such as joy, discovery, love, life, death and suffering, which I believe the observer shares with me. The knowledge that mundane forms and familiar human postures can convey emotions and establish relationships expanded and gave new life to my understanding of portrait painting.

The recent emergence of body language, or kinesics, provided me with an awareness and insight into nonverbal communication between human beings that was important in my work. An individual's emotional state relates directly to his or her physical posture and gesture and I use these unconscious signals to relate a message to the viewer. I found that in addition to the commonly recognized facial expressions and body gestures (i.e. turning up the corners of the mouth to indicate happiness, or folding the arms across the chest as a sign of isolation and protection) the hands are particularly expressive vehicles for nonverbal communication. Artists, actors and politicians throughout history recognized the symbolic power of the hand gesture and used this to their advantage. I paid careful attention to the unconscious signals present in the individual's choice of garment; even the selection of something as simple as clothing becomes personally symbolic and psychologically potent.

The study of archetypes and symbols provided me with insights into the nature of my work. I became increasingly cognizant of their presence, but feel it necessary to point out that I did not include these symbols by conscious effort. I relied heavily on an intuitive sense of what was right for the image. Carl Jung states in Man and His Symbols "Logical analysis is the prerogative of consciousness; we select with reason and knowledge. The unconscious, however, seems to be guided chiefly by instinctive trends, represented by corresponding thought forms--that is, by the archetypes."<sup>1</sup> In retrospect I found that I composed several images that contain archetypal symbols of personal significance. I am aware that the interpretation of these elements largely depends on my own knowledge of the individual portrayed or the situation presented. The casual observer may or may not perceive the symbolism or the message I try to convey. I made no attempt to formulate a universal (or personal) set of symbols to facilitate understanding. I believe that if I were to develop standardized symbols my work would lose a lot of the truthful insights that occur naturally as a part of the creative process.

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<sup>1</sup> Carl G. Jung, Man and His Symbols (Garden City, New York, 1964), p. 78.